

## CHAPTER - VI

### **COLERIDGE - III : IMAGINATION AND THE LANGUAGE OF POETRY**

Coleridge's interest in the perception of similitude in dissimilitude' and more generally, the entire 'manner in which we associate ideas' is well known, and could be said to lie at the centre of his thinking about the human faculty of the Imagination.

By its very name, the Imagination is connected with the making of images, and its relationship to the concept of metaphor is a radical one. The fundamental notion that emerges from Coleridge's thinking and practice as a poet and a critic is that the ultimate realization of the Imagination will take linguistic form, and that form is most obviously manifested in the sort of association of ideas which generates metaphor. One of the first Englishmen to have read and pondered the work of Vico, Coleridge conceives of metaphor as Imagination in action.

His notion of the mind was genuinely revolutionary. He saw it as 'an active, self-forming, self realizing system' (I.A.Richards, *Coleridge on Imagination*) which, far from being passive in the face of so called 'reality', actually imposed itself on the world, and creatively adapted and shaped it. Imagination acts as the chief instrument in this process. Almost literally, Imagination 'makes up' the world as it goes along. The most obvious and ideal instance of the process in human beings is, of course, the poet :

The poet, described in ideal perfection, brings the whole soul of man into activity, with the subordination of its faculties to each other according to their relative worth and dignity. He diffuses a tone and spirit of unity that blends, and (as it were) fuses, each into each, by that synthetic and magical power, to which I would exclusively appropriate the name of Imagination.

(*Biographia Literaria*, Chap. XIV)

The function of this faculty is to connect, to fuse, to blend and to reconcile in a process of unification for which Coleridge coined the term 'esemplastic', which he said meant 'to shape into one'. It is a process which, to use the account Shelley gave to 'vitally metaphorical' language, '... marks the before unapprehended relations of things and perpetuates their apprehensions'. And of course, in poetry, the process is exactly discernible :

This power, first put into action by the will and understanding, and retained under thier irremissive, though gentle and unnoticed control, *laxis effertur habenis*, reveals itself in the balance or reconciliation of opposite or discordant qualities : of sameness, with difference, of the general with the concrete; the idea with the image; the individua;l with the representative; the sense of novelty and freshness with old and familiar objects; a more than usual state of emotion with more than usual order; judgement ever awake and steady self-possession with enthusiasm and feeling profound or vehement; and while it blends and harmonizes the natural and the artificial, still subordinates art to nature; the manner to the matter; and our admiration of the poet to our sympathy with the poetry.

(Ibid)

In the terms we have been using, it is quite easy to see this process as coterminous with that of metaphor, and in elaborating his theory, Coleridge uses specific analysis of metaphors to pinpoint some rather abstract distinctions.

The fundamental principle of Coleridge's philosophy is organicism. Like a true Platonist, he wishes to discover the organic connection of all things, and to destroy the artificial boundaries between them constructed by Aristotelian

analysis. In this, he can be said to have inherited the distinction between Classical and Romantic art that came to him from Germany through the work of the Schlegels, Goethe and Schiller.

Classical art is concerned to point out the balanced harmony existing, in a well-ordered nature. Its basic principle is one of decorum, whereby elements are fitted to their proper classes and types, which are carefully distinguished (the Aristotelian accounts of metaphor itself come to mind as examples of this process). The Romantic concern is the depiction of a unity that lies underneath surface distinction's and which ignores clear-cut boundaries.

Thus, in 'classical' drama, 'fixed' types of character are manipulated in connection with certain universal and abstract aims and values. The classical play moves in accordance with preconceived 'rules' and patterns to demonstrate certain principles that exist, as it were 'outside' the play.

The Romantic dramatist, on the other hand, concerns himself with concrete issues, and with the 'inward nature' of the characters involved. His play obeys no 'rules' which spring from within itself, and manifest its own organic, concrete necessities. Chief amongst the Romantic dramatists for Coleridge was of course Shakespeare, and his essay on *The Tempest* is one of the best examples of this kind of thinking in action.

*The Tempest*, he says, is supremely 'a specimen of the romantic drama; i.e. of a drama, the interests of which are independent of all historical facts and associations, and arise from their fitness to that faculty of our nature, the imagination I mean, which owns no allegiance to time and place ... It addresses itself entirely to the imaginative faculty.' (*Coleridge on Shakespeare* p.224). As a result, the play manifests 'organicregularity' and not its 'mechanic' opposite.

Part of its organic quality resides of course in its use of metaphor, and Coleridge's comments on Shakespeare's metaphors are very revealing. The previous century's difficulties in this connection are of course notorious, none more so perhaps than some of those of Dr. Johnson. His comment on the metaphor in Macbeth.

Here lay Duncan

His silver skin laced with his golden blood

II, iii, 108-9

is justly famous :

No amendment can be made to this line, of which every word is equally faulty, but by a general blot. It is not improbable that Shakespeare put these forced and unnatural metaphors into the mouth of Macbeth as a mark of artifice and dissimulation....

(Notes on *The Plays of Shakespeare* 1765).

What Johnson is looking for is a 'classical' kind of distinction between the elements of the metaphor; a precise visual picture of 'image' of the abstract qualities referred to. What confronts him is, by the standards of those 'Aristotelian' requirements, plainly absurd. How can skin be 'silver' or 'blood golden' ?

In fact, in Coleridge's terms - and they are, by contrast, 'Platonic' such a metaphor shows exactly the Imagination's 'esemplastic' power at work. The terms 'silver' and 'golden' refer to Duncan's royal status over and above the reference they make to his physical body, rather in the same way that that status exists beyond its physical embodiment in him. As elements in the metaphor they are 'fused' and blended into a *concrete* unity, despite their abstract nature and function, independently of the 'mechanic' requirements of 'historical facts and associations', and the allegiances of 'time and space'. The result is a

highly complex meaning with more than one level, addressed entirely to the imaginative faculty rather than to the reason, and revealing in itself 'the balance or reconciliation of opposite or discordant qualities'.

So, in his essay on *The Tempest*, Coleridge argues strongly against the 'mechanic' sort of metaphor whose elements are precisely arranged in Aristotelian relationships one to another. He stresses that-

The power of poetry is, by a single word perhaps, to instil that energy into the mind which compels the imagination to produce the picture Prospero tells Miranda.

One midnight,  
Fated to the purpose, did Antonio open  
The gates of Milan; and in the dead of darkness,  
The ministers for the purpose hurried thence  
Me, and thy crying self.

Here, by introducing a single happy epithet, 'crying', in the last line, a complete picture, is presented to the mind, and in the production of such pictures the power of genius consists.

(Coleridge on Shakespeare pp.233-4).

Later on, he defends from 'the very severe but inconsiderate censure of Pope and Arbuthnot' Prospero's elaborate metaphor by which he directs Miranda's attention to Ferdinand,

And fringed curtains of thine eye advance,  
And say what thou seest yond.

(I, ii, 408-9)

On the grounds of its *organic* relation to the play, and to Prospero's development in it. Prospero has the role and air throughout of a magician - cum - dramatist; he is about to 'produce' Ferdinand before

Miranda suprisingly, and the metaphor gives the sense of an imminent act of presti-digitation, of a curtain about to rise on a marvellous sight.

Coleridge is careful to distinguish two aspects of the imaginative process: that of the so-called Primary Imagination, which perceives and operates within the 'ordinary world', and that of the so-called Secondary Imagination which re-works this world, and impresses its own shape upon it. *Words* are the means to this end. And the process, whereby words construct a 'reality' from within themselves, and impose this on the world in which we live, is a process of metaphor.

Coleridge is careful to juxtapose another faculty to Imagination, and to assign it an inferior function. He terms it the Fancy. If imagination is a unifying 'esemplastic' power, Fancy is merely a power of assembling or collection, involving simply the mechanical noting of resemblances, in the manner, somewhat, of Hartley's 'association of ideas'. And the sort of distinction Coleridge draws between the kinds of metaphor produced by Fancy on the one hand and by Imagination on the other is extremely interesting.

Fancy is 'the faculty of bringing together images dissimilar in the main, by some one point or more likeness distinguished'. Such images have no 'nature or moral' connection, but are constructed by the poet on the basis of 'some accidental coincidence'. That is, Fancy represents mere aggragation, more noting of factitious 'similarities' between things. As an example of this, he points to these lines from Shakespeare's *Venus and Adonis*:

Full gently now she takes him by the hand,  
A lily prisoned in a gaol of snow,  
Or ivory in an alebaster band :  
So white a friend engirts so white a foe.

His point is that, in this account of two sorts of whiteness, the

elements of the metaphors remain separate entities, although yoked together by the lines : *lily, snow; ivory, alabaster; white friend, white foe*. There is no *interaction*, no blending of the elements here : The boundaries between them remain intact. In other words, the passage lacks Imagination.

... the power by which one image or feeling is made to modify many others, and by a sort of fusion to force many into one ... combining many circumstances into one moment of thought to produce that ultimate end of human thought and human feeling, unity, and thereby the reduction of the spirit to its principle and fountain, who alone is truly One.

(Coleridge on Shakespear, pp 64-65, Chap. XV).

As he says elsewhere,

... images, however beautiful, though faithfully copied from nature, and as accurately represented in words, do not of themselves characterize the poet. They become proofs of original genius only as far as they are modified by a predominant passion; or by associated thoughts or images awakened by that passion; or when they have the effect of reducing multitude to unity, or succession to an instant..

(*Biographic Literaria*, Chap XV)

As an example of this imaginative process, and of the unity produced by 'this greatest faculty of the human mind' he cites this metaphor from the same poem :

Look ! how a bright star shooteth from the sky;  
So glides he in the night from Venus' eye !

(II, 815-16).

- and it is easy to see what he is getting at. In his own words,

How many images and feelings are here brought together without effort and without discord, in the beauty of Adonis, the rapidity of his flight, the yearning, yet hopelessness of the enamoured gazer, and a shadowy ideal character is thrown over the whole.

(*Coleridge on Shakespeare*, p.65).

What he means is that each element of the metaphor interacts with each other element : each affects and is affected by the other, and the result is unity. As I.A.Richards says of these lines,

The seperable meanings of each word, Look ! (our surprise at the meteor, hers at this flight), *star* ( a light - giver, an influence, a remote and uncontrollable thing) *shooteth* (the sudden, irremediable, portentous fall or death of what had been a guide, a destiny), *the sky* (the source of light and now of ruin), *glides* (not rapidity only, but fatal ease too), *in the night* (the darkness of the scene and of Venus' world now ) - all these separable meanings are here brought into one.

(*Coleridge on Imagination*, p.83).

Not only do we sense the way in which Adonis's flight appeared to Venus, but we also find ourselves, because of the inter-connections on which the metaphor insists, *creatively* and sympathetically making these connections ourselves. Instead (as in the case of Fancy's metaphor) of being confronted by clever comparisons, whose precisely worked-out relations we passively contemplate, this metaphor gives us work to do. The pattern of thought it proposes is, as it were, referred from Shakespeare's mind to our own, and requires our participation to 'complete' it. It draws us in, involves us in its own process, gives us the responsibility for the creative act of *closure* with itself. This vitalizes

the metaphor. As Coleridge says, in one of his many brilliantly illuminating comments on Shakespeare, 'You feel him to be a poet, in as much as for a time he has made you one - active creative being'.

The distinction between metaphors of the Fancy and those of the Imagination is a valuable one, for it begins to suggest a means of analysing metaphor in terms rather more appropriate to itself than those of Aristotle and his followers. Their analysis took account only of the relationship of the metaphor's elements to each other. Coleridge seems to want to take into account the relationship between the metaphor and its audience, on the grounds that the degree of imaginative response of those to whom the metaphor is addressed contributes in full measure to its final effect.

Let us now return to the terms *abstract* and *concrete*, and briefly glance at them in relation to Fancy and Imagination themselves, and in a context which makes Coleridge's constant use of Shakespeare as an example a matter of considerable significance. The central feature of the metaphors of Fancy is that they do not creatively involve their audience in themselves. They are 'abstract' in this sense and, however ingenious they may be, there is a gulf between them and their audience which matches and reflects the gulf between the separate elements which compose them. They are metaphors in which the language is used self-consciously, artificially. They are metaphors, in effect, characteristics of language in a particular form. That is, when it is written down.

The metaphors which spring from the Imagination do, as has been said, require the involvement of an audience. In this sense, they are part of 'concrete' experience, and their language is never self-conscious, or artificial. Indeed, as Coleridge says, the Imagination.

acts by so carrying on the eye of the reader as to make him almost lose the consciousness of words - to make him see everything, as Wordsworth has grandly and appropriately said,

*Flashed* upon that inward eye  
which is the bliss of solitude ;

- and to make everything present by a series of image. And this without exciting any painful or laborious attention, without any anatomy of description ... but with the sweetness and easy movement of nature.

(*Coleridge on Shakespeare*, p.66).

Language, Coleridge claimed, is the 'armoury of the human mind', containing the 'weapons of its future conquests'. What seemed to him lacking in the previous century and in his own was a proper sense of language's power, in its capacity as an instrument of the Imagination to conquer a realm beyond the immediate world perceived by the eye. We live, he claimed, under a 'despotism of the eye' from which Plato had aimed to emancipate us. But nevertheless,

Under this strong sensuous influence, we are restless because invisible things are not the objects of vision; and metaphysical systems, for the most part, become popular, not for their truth, but in proportion as they attribute to causes a susceptibility of being seen, if only our visual organs were sufficiently powerful.

(*Biographia Literaria*, Chap. VI).

It is exactly this 'susceptibility of being seen' that is the standard applied by Dr. Johnson to Shakespeare's metaphor of Duncan's 'silver skin laced with his golden blood'. By that standard, the metaphor is indeed improper. It yields hardly anything to the sight, and minds accustomed, by their very commitment to literacy, to the visual modes of reading and writing as the most rewarding forms of communication will find its elements wholly unrelated to each other, and thus incomprehensible. In 'abstract' visual terms, under the despotism of the eye, such a metaphor does not and cannot work.

But the Imagination, by its nature, is directed towards that inward eye that Wordsworth celebrates. And the language appropriate to its nature can for that reason hardly be language in written form. For whilst writing offers a physical counterpart of language, it is not its primary mode of communication. Language concrete and primary form is speech, human utterance. And far from reproducing speech, writing could be said to *reduce* it. Writing takes the full response of oral utterance, imbued as it is with the personality, tone of voice and bodily presence of its speaker, from whom it is never normally separated, and replaces these with the impersonality and silence of marks on paper. The richness of oral ambiguity, of the 'language really used by men' is replaced by the relatively antiseptic and certainly abstract 'clarity' of writing, where each word's 'meaning' can be precisely assigned. Dr. Johnson was a great writer (and a very great compiler of dictionaries which assign 'meaning'). In his view 'A dramatic exhibition is a *book* recited with concomitants that increase or diminish its effect' (*Preface to Shakespeare*, 1765). However, Shakespeare's medium was the oral dimension of the language. Most of his audience was probably non-literate. And in any case, he was a dramatist, not a writer. As drama, as utterance, the metaphor of Duncan's silver skin and 'golden' blood works very well indeed. As Coleridge said 'poetry gives most pleasure when only generally and no perfectly understood'. I.A. Richards comments on this that 'what he is pointing to is the superiority of the characteristic Shakespearean structure of meaning over the characteristic later eighteenth century structures (*op.cit.* p.215).

This is not the place to argue whether it was this oral aspect of Shakespeare's structure of meaning that most appealed to the romantic mind. But it is worth pointing out that the sort of metaphors Coleridge assigned to the Imagination are those which exhibit the most obvious characteristics of speech. The interaction of the elements, the 'esemplastic' fusing together of the parts, are the sorts of things that happen, naturally, when we speak; especially if we are driven by the

'spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings'. As Marshall McLuhan has described it, in oral interchange.

There are numerous simultaneous vistas of any topic whatever. The subject is looked at swiftly from many angles : classic notions and insights concerning that subject are ; via memory, on the tip of every tongue in the intimate group.

- whereas, in respect of the written word,

The reader's eye not only prefers one sound, one tone, in isolation; it prefers one meaning at a time. Simultanities like puns and ambiguities - the life of spoken discourse - become, in writing, affronts to taste, floutings of efficiency.

*(The Effect of the Printed Book on Language in the 16th century)*

In short, Coleridge's idea of the Imagination and the way in which it differs from the Fancy, leads us directly to language and to the spoken language at that; its greatest artist Shakespeare. The notion of Fancy leads, almost as directly, to a language 'reduced' to its isolated elements, each with its 'meaning' carefully and separately defined. In a sense, and certainly to Coleridge, the 'model' for his sort of language is Hartley's doctrine of the association of ideas. Words, like ideas, are 'associated' with each other in the way that bricks are brought together to build up a wall. Each word has a carefully established relationship to a Thing which it represents, physically (Swift had neatly satirized exactly this notion of language in his own day in *Gulliver's Travels* where the scientists in Laputa hold objects upto each other as a substitute for talking.

It is this artificial distinction between language and reality, words and things, that Coleridge's idea of Imagination is designed to break down. 'I would', he wrote to Godwin in September 1800, 'endeavour to destroy the old antithesis of Words and Things; elevating, as it were Words into Things and living Things too'.

Metaphor provides the means by which words are 'elevated' into 'living Things', because for a word to 'live' it needs to be uttered, or at least to feel utterable; to have the impress of 'real men' upon it. The poet, Wordsworth reminds us, is 'a man speaking to men'. And when metaphor reduces 'multitude to unity, or succession to an instant', it is doing what the speaking voice does with language: imposing the unity of a single personality on the multitudinousness of sound, and substituting the immediacy of utterance for the silent sequential process of writing and reading. Thus, '.... images, however beautiful' only become 'proofs of original genius' when 'a human and intellectual life is transferred to them for the poet's own spirit'. So, the following metaphor, whilst not objectionable, remains merely mechanical, and would not be out of place in a book of topography':

Behold you row of pines, that shorn and bowed  
Bend from the sea-blast, seen at twilight eve.

But, when the same metaphor is slightly modified, invested and merved with humanity, it rises 'Into semblance of poetry' :

Yon row of bleak and visionary pines,  
By twilight glimpse discerned, mark I how they flee  
from the fierce sea blast, all their tresses wild Streaming  
before them.

(*Biographia Literaria*, Chap. XV)

'Language', says Coleridge, 'is framed to convey not the object alone, but likewise the character, mood and intentions of the person who is representing it.' Language, that is, is utterance; it utters (outers') the inner reality and, by Imagination, imposes this on the world beyond. By this means (and it is a process, as we shall see, that has occupied the attention of modern linguists and anthropologists) language and 'reality' are intimately related.

Nature, the 'prime genial' artist' is also involved in a process of 'completion', of blending and fusing variety into unity. So man's art imitates nature by limiting this process. His Imagination, as the faculty which blends and fuses, is thus 'a repetition in the finite mind of the eternal act of creation'.

Imagination, then, is the 'shaping spirit' that projects man's mind onto the world, making it interact with the world; as the elements of metaphor interact with each other. 'Reality' is thus the product of the Imagination and that upon which it plays. Its most obvious manifestation is linguistic and, as Coleridge wrote to James Gillman in 1827, in terms that reveal the full extent of his opposition to the view of language promulgated by Sprat.

It is the fundamental mistake of grammarians and writers on the philosophy of grammar and language to suppose that words and their syntaxis are the immediate representatives of things, or that they correspond to things. Words correspond to thoughts, and the legitimate order and connection of words to the laws of thinking and to the acts and affections of the thinker's mind.

He adds, perhaps sensing the inadequacy even of his own writing, '... Read this over till you understand it. God bless you'.

Imagination stretches the mind, then, because it 'stretches' reality by the linguistic means of metaphor. Given this, metaphor cannot be thought of as simply a cloak for a pre-existing thought. A metaphor is a thought in its own right.

There is, finally, no way in which language can be 'cleared' of metaphor. Even Sprat's own pronouncements against 'swellings' of style, and in favour of a way of speaking that is 'close' and 'naked' are themselves riddled with metaphorical transferences of an obvious kind. Style can only 'swell' metaphorically, and this is the only way in which

speech can be 'close' and 'naked'. Language may attempt to come 'near the Mathematical plainness', but it can only do so by means of a metaphor of proximity in spatial relationships that itself is far from plain, and far from Mathematics.

We live in world of metaphors of the world, out of which we construct myths. We make the world up, in other words, as we go along, and we experience it concretely. Only if we are mistaken do we think of ourselves as separate beings, and place nature in antithesis to the mind, as object to subject, thing to thought, death to life. This is abstract knowledge, or the science of the mere understanding.

Concrete knowledge, on the other hand, recognizes that

the finite form can neither be laid hold of, nor is it anything of itself real, but merely an apprehension, a framework which the human imagination forms by its own limit, as the foot measures itself on the snow.

(*The Friend*, 2 ii, 1818)

It is of the essence of the Romantic revolution to have stressed the concrete links between man and the natural world. Coleridge, in giving these links an idelible liguistic stamp, thereby places metaphor at the centre of human concern, making it something far more important than an object of idle speculation for classifying literary critics. The words of perhaps his greatest interpreter, I.A. Richards, indicate the scope of this achievement . Because all objects which we can name or otherwise single out ... are projections of man's interests; because the Universe as it is known to us is a fabric whose forms, as we alone can know them, have arisen by and through reflection; and because that reflection, whether made by the intellect in science or by 'the whole soul of man's in poetry, has developed through language - and apart from language, can neither be continued nor maintained - the study of

the modes of language becomes, as it attempts to be thorough, the most fundamental and extensive of all enquiries ... Thus, the more traditional subjects of criticism, Coleridge's differentiation of imagination from fancy, and his still abstruser ponderings on objectification and the living word, unite with the analysis of the ambiguities and confusions that are overt or latent in all cases of metaphor; transference or projection to form one study... With Coleridge we step across the threshold of a general theoretical study of language capable of opening to us new powers over our minds.

*(Coleridge on Imagination, pp. 231-2).*